In the Beginning: Black Gay Men Describe Their Adolescent Sexual Initiation

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Significance of the Study

- Black Gay male sexual initiation and development is understudied in the social science, public health and medical literature.
- Pre-adolescent and adolescent Black Gay males may participate in unsafe sexual behaviors and are at increased risk when compared to their white counterparts for STDs, drug use and suicide.
- Qualitative data revealing the sexual initiation and development for Black Gay youth will help shape appropriate programming requirements for such youth.

Sexual Initiation and Development

- African American adolescents exposed to poverty or those who experience conflict within their familial unit are more likely to have experienced early sexual debut (McBride, Paikoff, Holmbeck; 2003).
- For adolescents living in impoverished environments, sexual activity may be valued as a symbol of attaining adult status, as there are few other opportunities (e.g., employment) or pathways available to demonstrate this status (Herold & Marshall, 1996; Upchurch 1999).
- Studies suggest African American youth initiate sexual activity at an earlier age with male and female partners compared to the national norm Rotheram-Borus, Rosario, Meyer-bahlburg,et al. (1994).
- Age-discrepant sexual relations constitutes sexual relations between an adolescent male 12-17 and adult male 21 order (Rind, 2001).

Associated Risks with Early Sexual Initiation

- Adolescent gay males are at risk for participation in unsafe sexual behaviors (Sussman, T. & Duffy, M. (1996).
- Gay and bisexual 13-19 year old males are overrepresented among HIV-infected youth, constituting 66 percent of AIDS cases reported (CDC, 2002).
- Such males may not be aware of their HIV status (CDC 2002a).
- Male youth who are who have sex with other males are at increased risk for HIV disease for two related reasons. Some engage in age-discrepant sexual relations. Their sexual partners include adult homosexual men Remafedi (1987) Second, young adult gay men are more likely to engage in risky sexual behaviors than are older gay men (Ekstrand, & Coates (1990).

Learning Objectives

- To understand how African American Gay men living with AIDS experienced their sexual initiation.

Methods

- These data were isolated from a larger study, "The Meaning and Utility of Spirituality in the lives of African American gay men living with AIDS" (Miller, 2000).
- The larger study followed Seidman's (1998) approach to in-depth interviewing and prolonged engagement.
- Ten informants participated in three, ninety minute interviews. The first interview was structured to solicit life history data. The second interview was designed to follow-up on salient and traumatic life events as well as understanding the coping strategies that were employed for the traumatic events. The third interview solicited the meaning the informants ascribed to the events.

Methods Continued

- The data for this presentation represent the informants' recollection and understanding of their sexual initiation and salient sexual behaviors during their sexual discovery.
- The isolated data were analyzed using narrative analysis (Cortazzi, 1993; Mishler, 1995; Rissman, 1993) and descriptive editing (Crabtree and Miller, 1999).

Informant Demographics

- The informants described themselves as Black Gay men born and raised in New York City
- Mean age 45.1, Age range 38-53
- Six of the ten men describe growing up in poverty
- Four describe growing up in a working class family
- Average age at AIDS dx=37.5
- Average time living with AIDS dx = 7.5 years
- Baptist n=5, Roman Catholic n=3, Episcopalian n=1, Jehovah's Witness n=1

Findings

- Sexual Initiation occurred in five categories:
  - Pre-Adolescent non-consensual sex
  - Peer Group Adolescent consensual sex
  - Peer Group Adolescent non-consensual sex
  - Consensual Age Discrepant Sexual Relations
  - Non-Consensual Age Discrepant Relations

Findings Continued

- Pre-adolescent non-consensual sex (Two reports)
  - Unsolicited fondling of a 4 year old by his teenage babysitters, who were brothers. The informant's mother walked in on the event and subsequently blamed the informant. He reports a second fondling event at the hands of another old male baby sitter.
  - First penetration was experienced by the informant when he was 4. The informant wanted to share physical contact, but was uncertain about having anal sex. He reports being conflicted about the event. He did not enjoy anal sex, "it hurt." "But I liked being with him. I did not know what to do since I wanted to be with him, though did not want to have anal sex again.

Findings Continued

- Peer Group Adolescent Consensual Sex (Two Reports)
  - Mutual masturbation in the gym showers at age 11.
  - Exhibition sexual play
    - The informant masturbated while others watched. He was 11 and was the first in his peer group to achieve manual ejaculation.

Findings Continued

- Peer Group Adolescent Non-Consensual sex (One Report)
  - Aggressive sexual play: The informant reports "humping a friend." This friend had an older brother who routinely forced the younger brother to perform oral sex."
  - The informant also forced the same person to perform oral sex on him as well. Through this activity, the informant achieved his first orgasm.

Findings Continued

- Consensual Age Discrepant Sexual Relations
  - Six informants report seeking sexual encounters with adult men.
    - Two informants discovered sex in the parks after dark when they were 14. They routinely sought adult male sexual encounters in the park after dark.
    - One informant found a group of adult gay men who became mentors for him. Some of these men became mentors for him after they engaged in sex. The sex was consensual but not continuous.
    - Three informants initiated sexual encounters with men, who were the adult friends of their parents or members of their church. The informants report being 13-16 and seeking men who were 45 and older
      - They report that the sexual relationships transformed into non-sexual mentor relationships over time. These men provided educational support by encouraging them to do well in school and helping them with home work. Providing assistance in applying to college, securing financial aid, and choosing a college major were the articulated benefits.

Findings Continued

- Non-Consensual Age Discrepant Sexual Relations (One Report)
  - The informant describes being raped when he was 12 by his 21 year old cousin. The cousin first engaged in sexually suggestive behaviors and then during the night, got into the bed with him and engage in non-consensual anal sex.

Discussion

- The informants experienced their sexual initiation and development during their pre-adolescent and adolescent years.
- These events occurred with their peers and age-discrepant group members – *older men.*
- Some informants experienced non-consensual, coercive, manipulate sexual encounters.
- Six of the informants describe seeking sexual encounters with adult men.

Discussion Continued

- Though the sample is non-random, the findings are consistent with other data regarding this population.
- The data illuminates questions regarding the sexual developmental needs of black gay youth.
  - What large scale studies and intervention research should be conducted to reveal the healthy sexual development of black male youth for the natural discovery of their sexuality and sexual orientation?

Discussion Continued

- The portion of the data describing sexual seeking behaviors with age-discrepant group members is consistent with other findings (Rind, 2002).
- The six informants who sought out adult men characterize the encounters and subsequent relationships as beneficial.

Conclusions

- The sexual initiation and development of Gay Black youth is a complex phenomenon.
- Additional research exploring their experiences as well as programmatic responses to insure their safety is warranted.
- Exploring the quality of age-discrepant relationships in light of HIV prevention efforts appears warranted.